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Inside South Africa: A Status Report

by Ken Owen

The character of South African politics has undergone a sea change in the last five years. Simple oppression of blacks by whites has given way to a contest between reform and violent rejection of the nature and scope of the reforms being instituted by the government of President P. W. Botha. The truism that reform is likely to create greater turbulence than brute oppression appears to be applicable, at least on the surface, to today's South Africa, where people are now dying in political violence at the rate of more than 80 a month. Compared with the mass riots of 1976, the scale of unrest is not great, but its extent is more wide-ranging and the tempo is rising. In April 1985, according to Minister of Law and Order Louis le Grange, there were no fewer than 1,549 "incidents of unrest" across the country, or more than 50 a day. Police listings under this rubric may include anything from outbursts of stone-throwing by schoolchildren to assassinations (often by gangs of youths whose preferred method is to pour gasoline on the victim and set him alight). Attacks on whites are the exception. Most victims are blacks, and most of these are not killed by the police but by other blacks.

The situation changes, if not day by day, then month by month. Nevertheless, its essence is unmistakable. Politically active blacks are divided into several competing political groupings, each seeking to consolidate its own support and eliminate rivals. (See "A Guide to Black Politics in South Africa" by Steven McDonald in *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 36, November 5, 1984.) For now, at least, it is a battle fought on the merciless assumption that "whoever is not with us is against us."

Crisis in the Third Tier

The challenge to white South Africa is clear. If reform is to avert revolution, or at least guerrilla warfare on the pattern of Northern Ireland, President Botha must

somehow create a black-controlled administrative structure to which he can transfer significant political power and responsibility at the second and third levels of government. In other words, he must install rival power centers of "collaborationists" in the very teeth of the revolutionary theory propounded by the radical black movements. Americans may recall how similar attempts to establish an administrative network in South Vietnam in the 1960s were frustrated by the systematic assassination of village headmen.

The initial attempt to create an "autonomous" third (i.e. local) tier of government in the townships went wrong from the start. Voter turnout for municipal elections since 1983 has been a derisory 11 percent or less, depriving the elected mayors and councillors of the minimum respect needed for legitimacy. When the new "independence" turned out to require additional funding from the township residents themselves, the difficulties of the black councils became overwhelming.

In the six months from October 1984 until March 1985, there were 109 attacks on councillors, five of whom were killed. The homes of 66 black councillors were destroyed or partially destroyed. Four black policemen were killed and 56 injured. Six churches, 143 schools, nine clinics, and 225 private homes were burned down; 518 black-owned cars were destroyed. The latter statistic takes on additional significance when it is noted that the rate of automobile ownership among South African blacks is less than one in 100.

In a typical incident, the town council of Daveytown (in the Eastern Transvaal) called a public meeting in April 1985 to explain the need for increases in electricity and water rates. The majority of the 600 people attending turned out to be hostile and demanded the councillors' resignation. When the councillors refused, they were stoned and had to run for their lives, led by Mayor Tom Boya. The crowd thereupon stoned Boya's car, damaged several other vehicles, and smashed up

the community theater. The same story, or more grisly variants thereof, can be repeated again and again. Local officials have been allowed to acquire firearms— forbidden to most blacks by law—and their homes have been put under police guard.

A total of 147 town councillors resigned in six months, compelling white officials to resume control of local government in many communities. In a number of places, refuse goes uncollected, simply because workers cannot go into the streets. Rents, having been increased, remain uncollected for long periods.

Worse, the collapse of the third tier has created immense difficulties for the next phase of reform—the envisaged replacement of white-run provincial councils by a set of multiracial Regional Services Councils (the second tier) on which all third-tier councils would be represented. These new regional authorities would deal with common services ("general affairs") such as roads and utilities, leaving the various racially homogeneous third-tier organs to deal with racially specific "own affairs." But it is difficult to see how the second tier can function if the third tier is systematically destroyed.

Given the arsenal of arbitrary powers which he commands, President Botha's response to the destruction of the third tier has been restrained. He has so far avoided the mass roundup of leaders, the unrestricted bannings and detentions, and the unflinching oppression with which his predecessor, B. J. Vorster, would have been inclined to handle such situations. The police still use rubber bullets and birdshot most of the time, the multiracial United Democratic Front has not so far been proscribed, and Minister of Law and Order le Grange has been trying to explain to the old-style National Party white supremacists that progress is not to be measured by the number of corpses in the streets. Use of the army has been confined mainly to shows of overwhelming force, or to support for the police. Despite the possession of arbitrary powers to detain political leaders indefinitely, the government is still using the courts to bring charges of treason.

Nevertheless, the risks of permitting the present violence to continue are clearly enormous. Breakdown of police discipline remains a constant threat. Moreover, white civilians are heavily armed, and it will not take many stonings before they start defending themselves. Given all this, can reform outrun revolution?

Is There a Botha Agenda?

The Botha government is set apart from its predecessors by a complex and in some ways undefined set of assumptions. First, the old ideal of separatism has given way to something more complicated—not yet federalism but a decentralized form of government that would, in President Botha's words, permit power-sharing without the domination of any community by any other.

It is difficult to gauge the meaning of such phrases. They may represent an initial bargaining position, or they may constitute a loophole through which Botha intends to escape majority rule. But the difficulties of

reform on the third and second tiers are proving so great that the government has been forced to seek negotiations for some kind of power-sharing at the first tier of government. The president has won the cooperation of Dr. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, leader of the moderate white opposition Progressive Federal Party, in efforts to set up a new forum for discussions with black leaders.

The government's ultimate goals, however, are still unclear. The National Party leadership may have a hidden agenda for reform which it is willing to implement through outright trickery if necessary. We do not know exactly where it stands with regard to the old idea that the political aspirations of the black majority can be channeled into, and satisfied by, the Bantustans. Certainly, immense sums of money continue to be spent and great effort is made to sustain and develop the Bantustans, both those which have a nominal independence and those which do not. At the least, the Bantustans may be seen as future components of a confederal system.

As for the urban blacks for whom no constitutional provision has been made (9 or 10 million, according to government calculations), the president will go no further than to say that they can control their own affairs in a democratic manner and that in matters of common interest to all races they will share power "as far as possible." The consummate bureaucrat, Botha envisages not a set of democratic or representative institutions, but a set of organizational structures that will enable blacks to influence, but not control, the white communities.

This thinking permeates the reform constitution (approved by two-thirds of the white electorate in 1983), which created two additional—and separate—chambers of parliament for the Coloured and Indian communities. The constitution, less democratic but more widely representative than the Westminster-based system it replaced, explicitly eliminates any possibility that a combination of Indian, Coloured, and white opposition voters can defeat the government. It does, however, permit powerful influences from the two other communities, and especially the Coloured community, to operate on the white legislature and the white-dominated executive. As a result, the first session of the new parliament saw some significant retreats from earlier apartheid policies. Reform, as perceptive observers predicted, is gaining its own momentum and operating in sometimes surprising ways.

There has been a fairly consistent effort to eliminate gratuitous discrimination between the races—for example, to narrow the gap between the pensions paid to whites and those paid to other races, and to pay equal salaries within the government. Educational facilities for blacks have been dramatically expanded (see "Black Education in South Africa: Key or Chimera?" by John A. Marcum in *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 41, April 15, 1985). Blacks are increasingly present in hitherto "white" universities, and private schools are permitted to enroll black pupils in growing numbers. Some restrictive legislation has been critically reviewed and,

most dramatic from the point of view of the white community, the government has committed itself to the repeal of the prohibitions on interracial sex and marriages. The recent repeal of the prohibition on multiracial political parties has prepared the ground for a radical realignment of political forces in the three minority communities.

Another development has been the successful effort of Coloured leaders to persuade the government to lift a policy of discrimination against black workers in the Western Cape, the emotional last redoubt of the Afrikaners. One consequence has been the defusing of the crisis at Crossroads, where the new policy has freed the government (to the chagrin of some overtly revolutionary factions) to adopt a more humane policy of voluntary resettlement in place of the constant and futile police raids. On a wider front, there has been a suspension of the harsh policy of moving communities by force in order to tidy up the demographic map.

In contrast to earlier National Party regimes, the Botha government has accepted the inevitability of black urbanization, bringing to an end nearly a century of effort on the part of the whites to ensure that black workers came to the cities only to the extent that their labor was indispensable. In a fundamental departure from past ideology, the government has begun to allow blacks to acquire freehold title to land in so-called "white South Africa," albeit only in areas set aside for them. The ban on multiracial residential areas remains (although it is largely ignored in downtown Johannesburg, where people of all races are simply moving into the more rundown areas). The government has also officially admitted that blacks living within "white" South Africa are entitled to South African citizenship and to a share in the running of the country's "general affairs"—at least "as far as possible." But the government is still studying what citizenship in this context will mean.

To give some practical effect to its new policies, the government has agreed to permit urbanized blacks—that is, blacks who are entitled by law to live in the cities—to move relatively freely from one city to another. The creation of the more efficient labor market that this step might bring about has obvious economic implications, but more important may be the effect exerted on industrial decentralization policies by the free movement of workers.

At the same time, the government is making a conscious effort to shed some of the immense burden of administration and control that apartheid requires. An example is the decision to put up for sale, at bargain prices, some 500,000 homes occupied mainly by black renters. Only about 50,000 houses have been sold thus far, usually for as little as R2,000 (about \$1,000) each, and the scheme has not been notably successful. The reasons for this indifferent performance range from deep suspicion among some blacks to an attitude of dependency among others that leads them to expect the government to provide housing. Nevertheless, the point is clear: the difference between ownership and rental is fundamental, not only to social behavior but

to political attitudes. A cynical observer has remarked that the black population will become quiescent when every family is sweating to pay off the mortgage. Americans will need no lectures on the effect of the creation of a property-owning middle class on political priorities.

Discontent on the Right

Although the reforms undertaken thus far are still inadequate, they are of major historical consequence. Those who denigrate the changes as cosmetic or unimportant have yet to explain why President Botha's initial and tentative policy shifts split the Afrikaner tribe from top to bottom, rupturing not only the National Party and the secret Broederbond organization that dominated the political process from behind the scenes for half a century, but even cultural and social structures down to the level of the Girl Guides.

The effects on party politics have been profound. Without the protection of manipulative and powerful Broederbond cells in every small town, the National Party is now as subject to revolt and conspiracy as any other political organization. Apartheid as an ideology of racial separation and territorial partition, along with the theme of the Afrikaner tribal "fight for survival," has been ceded by Botha's National Party to the Conservative Party of Dr. Andries Treurnicht and its smaller ally, the Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP). It is no accident that the CP has offered a new home to such notorious Vorster-era figures as Dr. Connie Mulder and Jimmy ("Biko's death leaves me cold") Kruger, along with scores of others.

The Conservative Party is now exploiting the government's commitment to repeal the laws prohibiting interracial marriage and sex, predicting that this must lead to the erosion of the laws that separate the races in residential areas, schools, hospitals, and so forth. The countrywide unrest plays directly into the hands of the CP by aggravating white fears of the black majority, and Botha's restraint in the use of the armed forces is loudly proclaimed to be the result of weakness and a loss of the will to govern.

Although the National Party still enjoys far greater support among the total white electorate than its right-wing rivals (46 percent versus 17 percent), its automatic majority has now been reduced to the merest edge of advantage over the CP in many constituencies of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, and the party's long-term future is uncertain.

Economic Factors

The decline in the fortunes of the National Party is not, however, due solely to right-wing rejection of its reformist bent. Three fundamental economic considerations also play a part.

First, the efforts to raise the standard of living of urban blacks have been extremely expensive. To this one must add the huge cost of sustaining development in the 10 autonomous and semiautonomous Bantustans (expected to reach R2.3 billion in 1985) and the cost of providing an army and an administration for Namibia.

As a result of these expenses, the white middle class is for the first time encountering uncomfortably heavy taxation.

Second, mismanagement of the inflation problem has taken a heavy toll. The government increased civil service salaries by 30 percent in order to dampen opposition within the bureaucracy to its constitutional changes, while slack financial control permitted extensive cost overruns in almost every department. At the same time, the money supply was permitted to grow by 30 to 40 percent a year, and the result, inevitably, has been soaring inflation of more than 15 percent, a 40 percent drop in the value of the rand, and, in the end, stringent policies to avert disaster. The consequent severe recession, aggravated by drought and a weak gold price, has been the worst suffered in South Africa in 40 years. For the first time since World War II, unemployed whites can often be seen outside small towns, hitching rides in search of work.

At this point, the government has no choice but to put the country through a wringer to ensure that a basis for sound recovery is laid. The recession, brutal as it may be, has already created a turnaround in the balance of trade of the order of R7 billion, and foreign debt is being retired at a record rate. The outcome is crucial to the success of reform.

Third, under U.S. and British influence, the government has turned increasingly away from the centrally controlled economic policies of the past. Its spokesmen now invoke "free markets" as an article of faith; moreover, they are acting on their new faith by eliminating subsidies to farmers and consumers, and by reducing, if not eliminating, the protectionist tariffs that shelter inefficient industries. In every case, the government runs headlong into vested interests.

One of these vested interests, whose eventual loss from the roster of automatic National Party supporters now appears to have been accepted as inevitable by Botha and his cabinet, is the party's traditional rural power base. Until recently, the 70,000 white farmers, sustained by scores of small-town communities with populations ranging between 2,000 and 15,000, were the country's most pampered constituency because South Africa's curious constitution not only permitted but encouraged gerrymandering in favor of the rural constituencies. As a result, one rural vote could be worth roughly two urban votes. Generous farm legislation not only gave farmers price supports and easy loans, but effectively insulated them against the natural disasters that are common in the South African climate and, it is often argued, against their own incompetence. The Afrikaner dirt farmer driving a Mercedes-Benz is a South African stereotype, and the farmers have been a mainstay of Afrikaner political power since early this century.

It is thus an historic event that Botha's cabinet has now fallen into open warfare with the rich and powerful maize farmers, refusing to support the price of the grain at the levels to which the farmers are accustomed. The National Maize Producers' Organization

(Nampo) tried to force the government's hand by withholding grain from the market, an act of outright blackmail that threatened to add food riots to the existing unrest. But the response of Minister of Agricultural Economics and Water Affairs Greyling Wentzel was unyielding, and in the end Nampo found itself displaced from the semiofficial board that had provided it with a powerful forum to lobby on behalf of its members.

The immediate breach may not be permanent—the farmers need the government—but most observers think this episode will tilt the balance against the National Party in maize-producing constituencies such as Bothaville, Parys, and Harrismith where it has recently managed to cling to power by tiny margins.

The Argument for Compromise

Reform requires an economy that can deliver to all communities the promise of a better life in a new kind of state. If revolution requires a breakdown of administration, reform requires effectiveness. If revolution requires South Africa's isolation, reform requires expanding trade. If revolution requires schools to be closed and drains to be clogged, reform requires both to be open. If revolution requires destruction of the nascent black middle class, reform requires the expansion and protection of that middle class.

President Botha's challenge is to achieve some kind of certainty—a measure of optimism among whites and a measure of quiet among blacks—by the next general election in 1989. Always in the background lies the temptation for the whites to retreat to their last line of defense, the use of force to partition South Africa. So long as they are trying to build a common future for white and black, Botha's men are at a tactical disadvantage. But if they were to turn to the destruction of the South African state, to its forcible dismemberment, they would have at their disposal quite terrifying resources of industrial, financial, and military power.

The black middle class, the black moderates, looking across their borders to the misery spawned by years of war in Mozambique and Angola, realize that South Africa commands the resources and the power to make any previous conflict on the continent seem like a skirmish. There are men on both sides of the South African racial divide who are willing to unleash that catastrophe. But as of mid-1985, fortunately, there are enough people on both sides who recognize that the best argument for compromise is the horror of the alternative. So the search for compromise continues.

Ken Owen is associate editor and a regular columnist of South African Associated Newspapers (SAAN). He was editor of the *Sunday Express* (Johannesburg) from 1982 until early 1985, and then launched the recently founded *Business Day*. From 1969 to 1977, he was Washington bureau chief for the Argus group of South African newspapers.